


12-4-1980

# RI: An Exodus from the Cities

Chester Smolski

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski\\_text](https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text)

 Part of the [Community-Based Learning Commons](#), [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Smolski, Chester, "RI: An Exodus from the Cities" (1980). *Smolski Texts*. 99.  
[https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski\\_text/99](https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text/99)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chester Smolski Collection at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Smolski Texts by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@ric.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@ric.edu).

# R.I.: an exodus from the cities <sup>4 Dec. 1980</sup>

**Chester Smolski**

The numbers from the 1980 census are now starting to appear, and although some of the figures are preliminary, they still give an indication of trends. Until more detailed numbers become available in the spring, city and town totals for Rhode Island can now form the basis for some early analysis of changes over the past 10 years.

By law, the United States Bureau of the Census must supply final state population totals to the President on Jan. 1 so

**Rhode Island is one of three states likely to record a population loss during the decade**

that distribution of representatives to the Congress can be allocated. Early figures indicate that the states of New York and Pennsylvania will lose three or four representatives because of population loss, while some Sunbelt states, including California, Florida and Texas, may gain as many as three representatives.

Rhode Island will likely be the only other state to record a population loss in this decade, with the 945,761 total down by less than one percent from the 949,723 total of 1970. Although such small loss will not affect our total of two representatives, it puts us in a tiny minority group of only three states to have lost population, if the preliminary counts hold true. Overall, the country added approximately 23 million people in 47 states, an increase in excess of 11 percent.

All three states recording a population loss are located in the Snowbelt, that northern tier of states which has been subjected to a heavy loss of jobs and subsequent population migration. In Rhode Island's case, the job and population loss was a direct result of a policy decision made in Washington, i.e., to move some of the Navy installations here down south. Rhode Island Statewide Planning has estimated that 45,000 Navy personnel, their families and ancillary groups left the state as a result of that 1973 decision.

The accompanying map of population change in the state illustrates the impact of that Navy move. Nine communities lost population but the rate of loss was greatest for Middletown, North Kingstown and Newport, with percentage

losses of 41, 36 and 15 respectively, the three communities most affected by the Navy pull-out from Newport and Quonset-Davisville.

If that Washington determination had not been, if those 45,000 Navy-attached residents were still here, Rhode Island would have recorded a four percent increase and a total state population close to one million. Instead, it now appears that we must wait until late, rather than early in the 1980's before we reach that special million mark.

But not all of Rhode Island's population loss has been Navy-related, and it is important that those communities with declining populations not attributed to the Navy withdrawal question why their people are leaving. Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket and Woonsocket, with losses of 13, 10, 8 and 2 percent respectively, continue a pattern of the 60's when these four cities also lost population. Poor housing and schools, crime, overcrowding, and residents displaced by urban renewal and highway construction together with the attraction of the suburbs are some of the reasons why people left. This flow to suburbia is characteristic of a national trend. In 1970, for the first time in our history, more people lived in suburbs than in central cities.

The losses experienced by suburban Barrington and Cranston, which lost 8 and 3 percent respectively, are unusual. The explanation appears to be that families which had children at home in 1970 found themselves, 10 years later, with children having grown and moved away or in college. (College students are considered as residents of the community in which they are housed, whether this be Providence or Boise). Both of these affluent communities send large numbers of their high school graduates away to school. Supporting this explanation is the trend to smaller households, evidenced by the 7 and 19 percent respective increases in the number of housing units, primarily apartments.

Most communities in the state recorded a population growth during the 1970's with eight towns experiencing a 30 percent or more increase. Narragansett, with an increase of 69 percent -- highest in the state -- continues a growth rate that caused that town to more than double its population in the 60's.

The pattern of growth within the state is similar to that of the nation, i.e., greater growth in non-metropolitan areas as compared with city-based metropolitan areas. Six of the nine communities in Rhode Island that are classed as non-metropolitan had growth rates ranging from 27 to 67 percent, or an average of 46 percent for this western part of the

state extending from Glocester to Charlestown, without Coventry. This non-metropolitan growth well illustrates the "suburbs of suburbs-phenomenon of the 70's."

New Shoreham, with its 25 percent increase, is similar in growth to the other six non-metropolitan towns, but Newport and Middletown, the remainder of the non-metropolitan area, registered a total loss of approximately 17,000 persons -- a direct result of the Navy withdrawal.

The other growth area of the state is in South County. According to a study done by the Regional Coastal Impact Program, the seven communities studied

**The population and job losses were the result of the decision to move the Navy bases**

experienced a growth in the 70's in excess of 15,000, or a percentage increase of about 27 percent. Within the region, increases ranged from seven percent for Westerly to 69 percent for Narragansett.

The pattern of population change in Rhode Island for the 1970's follows that of the 1960's, i.e., a loss of population for several cities and a slower growth for those communities at the northern end of Narragansett Bay. Shifting population and subsequent growth is taking place toward the periphery of the state, particularly in the western and southern parts. Although a small number increase appears large, in percent, when treating these small communities, the pattern of growth is a decidedly clear one here and in the nation -- the move to small town America and a move toward the coastal regions.

Future population growth and movement in the state will be markedly affected by the proposed Digital Equipment Corporation development in West Greenwich, with its potential for as many as 5,000 jobs, together with the impact on Davisville should oil and gas be found in the Atlantic. These are statewide issues that must be addressed at that level. This is why the land management program for the state to be introduced for the fourth time in the next session of the General Assembly must be passed. The potential for population and job growth in our energy-constrained state is too great to allow such developments to be left solely in the hands of local communities.

*Chester E. Smolski is director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.*

